

El Ceibo: Andean Traditional Organization & International Chocolate

Following land reform and the abolition of serfdom in Bolivia in the 1950s, peasants migrated in streams to the sparsely populated Alto Beni region on the eastern edge of the Department of La Paz. The prospect of rich and unlimited farmland waiting to be carved out of virgin tropical rainforest lured thousands of settlers from Bolivia's highlands, where Aymara and Quechua Indian families were being economically squeezed by overcrowding, land fragmentation, and low prices for cash crops.

Accustomed to wide-open spaces, cool temperatures, and highland crops, they suddenly had to shed their heavy woolen clothing and learn to deal with heat, insects, new diseases, and an entirely different type of agriculture. But although they had to give up their attire, they kept their distinctive local traditions of music and dance and other expressions of ethnic identity. They built a new life on the strength of shared Andean forms of collaboration and social organization, particularly a system of rotating leadership and reciprocal community obligations.

In the 1970s, a dozen agricultural cooperatives sprung up in the new settlements along the Río Beni. In 1978 these groups joined together to establish a federation to increase the income earned from cacao by jointly processing and marketing their product. Over the next 15 years, El Ceibo gradually grew to become one of the most widely known and respected rural cooperatives in Bolivia. Its membership in 1994 consists of 37 co-ops, whose 900 members benefit from an array of services including transport, agro-processing, technical training, commercial credit, and related agricultural production, research, and extension services. El Ceibo now manufactures its own chocolate products, obtaining for its members an added value seldom available to native producers. Its annual export of \$600,000 worth of organic cacao beans and chocolate products has made El Ceibo a household name among ATOs (Alternative Trade Organizations) in Western Europe, and recently its products have reached health food stores in the United States. El Ceibo's chocolate is also sold in various forms to national industries, small shops, and street vendors in Bolivian cities.

El Ceibo's dynamic system of self-management is based upon traditional Aymara organizational practices of frequent leadership rotation, wage equality, and consensus-building assemblies. To ensure its autonomy, El Ceibo provides extensive training in business, finance, and agricultural skills and sends selected members for study abroad and to Bolivian universities. El Ceibo sponsors cultural festivals in which each of the 37 member communities performs the dance and music traditions they brought from their native communities in the highlands.

— Kevin "Benito" Healy



Women members at El Ceibo's processing and manufacturing plant in La Paz, Bolivia, package cocoa for national and world markets. Members working at the plant relocate temporarily to the city from their homes in the Alto Beni region, which are 10 hours away by truck. Co-op members rotate jobs every two years.

Photo by Robin Bowman, courtesy Inter-American Foundation